

98-84362-25

Scotton, A.

The duty of members to
the store

Manchester

1899

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334	Scotton, A
C767	The duty of members to the store, and of the store to the movement (by A. Scotton) Manchester, Co-operative union limited, 1899.
	8 p. 18 ¹ / ₂ en.
	Volume of pamphlets
334	Another copy (Volume of pamphlets)
Z1	

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TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35mmREDUCTION RATIO: 10:1IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA ☒ IB ☐ IIB ☐DATE FILMED: 3-6-98INITIALS: BTRACKING #: 32451

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The Duty of Members to the
Store, and of the Store to
the Movement.

[By A. SCOTTON.]



Manchester:

PUBLISHED BY THE CO-OPERATIVE UNION LIMITED, LONG MILLGATE.

1899.

The Duty of Members to the Store, and of the Store to the Movement.

We have passed the jubilee of the co-operative movement, and all must admit that its progress has been most remarkable, and its success very great. Still we are far, very far from the goal the early pioneers started to reach. As a commercial system, as a money-making concern, it has succeeded; for the profits made have been millions. But as the regenerator of society it has not done all it ought nor all it might. Production—or self-employment—has not been so successful, although this is the most important. And why is this so? It is because the mass of the people have not yet grasped in all its fulness what co-operation can do for them.

There never was a time in the history of this country when the working men had so many professed friends—so many anxious for their welfare. We have Liberal, Tory, Unionist, and trade unionist, the Labour Party, and the Independent Labour Party. And how eagerly and earnestly working men take sides with one or other of these parties, as though their social salvation depended on any of these! Politically, I would say "a plague on both your houses," for has not America free institutions and the most democratic form of government in the world? And still the relations between capital and labour are as strained there as anywhere, and strikes are as frequent and conducted on both sides as fiercely as in Europe. Evidently there is something lacking even there. Then at home we have the trade unionists doing a good work in preventing the capitalists grinding them down to the lowest point, and in many cases they are getting wages up, with its consequent rise in the price of commodities to the consumer. Let the unionist get all he wants, what then? He is still the wage-slave of the capitalist. There is but one solution to the whole question, and that is the self-employment of the worker. That is what the Rochdale Pioneers had in their minds when they started, and that idea was embodied in their first copy of rules. But they felt they could never accomplish that, for they had not the capital to work with. Therefore they started a distributive store to get that capital. And whether the surplus capital is so employed or not,

when a member joins a store he has duties to perform as well as benefits to receive, and we will briefly glance at those duties.

Now, what are our objects as co-operators? Briefly these. We aim at benefiting each other by combining to do that which we could not do individually. Therefore we become members of a co-operative society, and agree to be bound by the laws by which it is governed, our object no doubt being the direct advantage we shall gain. But there are other considerations besides those in the book of rules—moral laws which ought to be equally binding on us as men.

The first duty of a member, I think, is to find his share of the capital necessary to carry on the work. I don't say he should be compelled to have a large amount in the store; but he ought to have sufficient to enable the committee to advantageously meet all his requirements. I have known members who have been in a society twenty years, and who have drawn scores of pounds of dividend, and never had 30s. standing to their credit in their lives. This has not always been caused by their poverty, but because they have no sympathy with our movement beyond what they can get out of it. Such are not true co-operators, for, as a rule, they, having little to lose, are often the most noisy and extravagant at our quarterly meetings. I admit there are a few who by peculiar circumstances are compelled from time to time to draw all the dividend they can. These are constantly doing battle with the difficulties of life, and to such co-operation is a real blessing, and they ought to have our sympathies, for some of our best members belong to this class. But the sham co-operator shirks his responsibility; will get all he can, but will not take any of the risks; he will periodically draw his dividend, and re-invest it in other and anti-co-operative concerns, thereby doing an injustice to his own society, but, as he thinks, making his money safe, whereas there is no bank safer than the people's bank, brought into existence by their own requirements, managed practically by themselves for their own special benefit. Therefore the first duty is to find the capital necessary to carry on the work.

The second duty is to bring all their trade so as to remuneratively employ that capital. There are members in societies who encourage and support other and antagonistic concerns. They do a little trade with the co-operative society, and the rest with the private shopkeeper. These and the public keep his servants well employed, help him to turn his stocks over quickly, thus preventing an undue depreciation, and sometimes (as in the case of those tea shops giving presents, which their customers' profits had previously purchased)

they buy those goods producing the largest profit, and by these means place the shopkeeper in a position to undersell the store; and then they have the audacity to get up in a members' meeting and harass the committee by asking, How is it they cannot sell as cheap as anybody else? They are anxious to do all their trade at their own store, but they can get some things cheaper at Mr. So-and-So's, and they really cannot sacrifice their own interest by buying everything at the store. Then the committee reply, and say, You are helping him to undersell us, we can sell as cheaply as he if you will be more loyal to your own shop. Oh, that word loyalty! How often is it preached, but how little practised. For in some cases the members might turn on to their committees and say, Physician, heal thyself, for where is your loyalty as regards the Wholesale, and the co-operative productive societies? What a tremendous trade passes those institutions every year which might with advantage be done with them. The trade of the whole of the distributive societies for 1898 was forty-one-and-a-half millions, and yet the trade with the Wholesale and the productives was but little over twenty millions. Think of it, the bulk of co-operative trade went outside into the competitive world. Fellow members, we may be unconsciously supporting those men who make the squalid homes of the miserable victims of the sweater. In fact I know some instances where it is done. Co-operation means, if it means anything, that it shall tend to brighten the dark lot of many, too many miserable homes, and cast a ray of light across the gloomy path of life. How can it do that, if we maintain, uphold, and feed those very manufactories where the wages paid to the workers are a disgrace to our country? To you who are members of committees I say the Wholesale and the productive societies cannot thrive except by trade; and you who are not committees but members of societies, ever bear in mind your societies cannot live except by trade. Think of the words of Shylock:—"You take my house if you take the prop that doth sustain it. You take my life if you take the means whereby I live."

The third duty is to do that trade on cash principles. One of the grandest features of our movement is, it frees a man from debt and dependence. What a tale could be told of the misery, suffering, and utter helplessness of the man who is the slave of another by being in his debt. How he has to submit to everything imposed upon him—if by a shopkeeper—either in quality or price, or perhaps both, and be like a lamb led to the slaughter; opens not his mouth through fear that if he did the supplies would be stopped, and thus the chains are bound around him until all hope

is gone. In many cases I know co-operation has snapped those chains asunder, and the enslaved has become free, and in the future could

Look the whole world in the face,
For he owed not any man.

But not only should we avoid credit for the good done, but because of the harm prevented. Take the number of stores throughout our movement, how very few of them fail; a remarkable contrast to the ordinary commercial concerns of the country. And among the few that do fail, nine out of every ten are shipwrecked by striking on that rock—credit. Some may be inclined to ask, Why introduce this subject at a co-operative conference? I do so because my fourteen years' experience as secretary of the Midland Section taught me that of all the dangers that beset a society, and especially a young one, this was the greatest.

In the next place it is the duty of members to elect the best men possible as committee and officers, and when elected give them their confidence and support. It is no use electing men to responsible offices, and then place every obstacle and difficulty in the way of their succeeding by the most petty factional opposition on almost every conceivable subject. This may seem strange conduct, but it is done. Men, whilst simply members of a society, may be held in respect and esteem; but no sooner are they elected on committee, than they become objects of suspicion and calumny. Their very motives and actions are misrepresented. One would sometimes think they were elected simply to be a target for fools to shoot at. Yes, and sometimes those who take the lead in these practices at quarterly meetings will always themselves decline to serve on committees. I have often thought the career of most committeemen in our societies had three stages—when first elected he is idolised; after a time he is criticised; and when they want what is called "new blood," he is scandalised. The success of a society depends more upon efficient and honest management, and is more important, than many members by their actions seem to think. When you have put men into a responsible position give them your generous confidence—not a blind adherence, but use a charitable and friendly vigilance; and if they are not what they ought to be, make short work of it, get rid of them, and put better men in their place.

In electing your committees, don't elect men because they work in the same shop, or live in the same street, or go to the same church or chapel. I say don't elect them merely because they are of the same "creed in religion or code in politics." Don't elect a

man because he is glib on the tongue, and can rant and shout at the quarterly meeting. Don't elect men because they ask silly questions on a balance sheet which no man can answer because they have no existence in the accounts. Members have sometimes mistaken this for profound wisdom, a clear insight, and great depth of thought, whereas it is the want of these very qualities which have prompted the questions asked. I have seen the most simple things imaginable be the means of getting a man elected. On one occasion a man whose ability was below the average, when the time came for the show of hands for him, instead of going on the platform to show himself, as all the others had done, he jumped on his seat, and, waving his hat over his head, shouted, "This is the boy to vote for." That act set the meeting in roars of laughter, and, though a comparatively unknown man, he headed the poll. What members should do is to elect men of ability, and, as far as they can, of known integrity and honesty of purpose—but, above all, of thorough, downright, unmistakable co-operative sympathies. If you get a man like that, although he may lack a little in commercial knowledge, that defect will be more than counterbalanced by faith in our principles, and his earnest desire to carry them out.

Much more could be said on the duty of the individual member to his store did not the limits of a conference paper forbid it.

And, lastly, I come to the most important duty of all—that of men being loyal to principle. If we are each thorough and true and loyal to principle, we shall yet establish a system which—

Will stand unshaken by the storms of time,
Deep as man's heart—and as man's hope sublime.

Now what I have advanced as regards the duty of members to the store will apply with equal force to committees, to the Wholesale, and to productive societies.

I was an active worker in our movement in its early days, and I know the difficulties we had to encounter thirty-six years ago. There was no Wholesale Society then. The bulk of co-operators of those days were men having little knowledge of business; and the co-operators of the present time are enjoying the results of the dearly-bought experience of the past. We made many blunders in those days in connection with the goods bought from the "commercial" of that period. Their business was to sell; and often were co-operative committees sold, for many societies, especially in villages, have had to struggle with heavy and somewhat unsaleable stocks which 'cute commercials had induced them to buy. We never shall know the extent of the undue influence brought to bear upon committees in the early days of our movement.

When the Pioneers started on their glorious career they sought to obtain something else besides profit. They aimed at procuring unadulterated articles. The impurities of goods in general commences not at the distributive shop, but amidst the trickeries of the manufactory and the false representations and mixings of the wholesale dealer, and that being so the societies combined to establish the Wholesale, even as individuals combined to establish the store. When we did this, was not our object to do away with the unnecessary expensive middleman? I say expensive, because "every superfluous hand engaged in an unnecessary work is a tax upon the public," and of the extent to which they are taxed they have no conception. Look at the thousands upon thousands of pounds spent every year in advertising, in telling people what they want (as though they did not know), and in also telling them where to get it (but always at their establishment). Look at the great army of glib-tongued, fashionably-dressed travellers constantly rushing to and fro throughout the land—adding largely to the cost but not one iota to the value of the goods they sell. All these expenses in the end have to come out of the "poor consumer," and, if we are true co-operators, are all unnecessary to us, and to do away with these expensive luxuries was one of the reasons for establishing the Wholesale Society.

We have referred to the duty of the member to the store—let us just look at the duty of the member to his fellow-member. Joining a store is a somewhat easy method of obtaining money. No wonder, then, that so many identify themselves with it from a purely selfish motive—from a desire for gain—nothing more. The higher aims and purposes of our movement never enter their minds; or, if they do, they are ignored. But my contention is, when a man joins a society it is his bounden duty to be loyal and faithful to it. He cannot disregard his obligations without injury to others. Let me illustrate what I mean. Suppose two men join a society—the one thinks and feels there is something grand and noble in the movement; a something that shall ultimately be a great benefit to himself and others; he has great faith in the power of the movement to help him and his fellows, and on that faith he invests all he has in the society, and, in addition, lets his dividend accumulate from time to time. He has done this on the assumption that all the other members are animated by the same desires and motives as himself. The other man, on the contrary, has joined from a purely selfish motive, and will not invest anything, and scarcely leaves any dividend in the society; as a consequence, having little to lose, he is indifferent as

to the future stability of the society. He is always for paying the biggest dividend, and for the smallest depreciation, and for the smallest reserve fund, and, in addition, will only trade at the society just for the few articles he cannot buy cheaper elsewhere. Now this man does not recognise his responsibilities, and is doing an injustice to the other. He is jeopardising and trifling with the other man's property; and although he may not be committing an illegal act, he is committing a moral wrong against his fellow-member. I am sorry to think we have too many of these in our societies, and, like the poor, "they will always be with us."

What we want to-day is to lift our movement out of the cold, dreary region of self-interest into the warm sunlight of mutual help and brotherly love. And in proportion as we understand, appreciate, and share in the benefits of organised co-operation is the measure of our responsibility actively to support and make it a means of advantage to others, and thus as members of one body co-operate for the good of all. For he who makes himself responsible for others' good, and labours to lift his fellow-men from a lower to a higher level, wins lasting regard and works most surely to his own good and his own reward. Let each act as though the success of the movement depends on us alone, ever keeping before us the highest aims of co-operation; not that it shall minister to our interest or enjoyment alone, but that it shall bring about a better state of life for the masses of the people. The real strength of a society is not in its numbers, nor the amount of its trade, but in the amount of true co-operative spirit among its members.

Let us, then, make the present truer and nobler than the past, "developing the highest efforts of heart and brain for a common end, imbuing life itself with a deeper meaning, stirring within us holy resolves, and waking slumbering heroisms into active life," by recognising the grand principle that no man liveth 'o himself, but

Lives to hail that season.
By gifted men foretold,
When men shall live by reason,
And not alone for gold;
When man to man united,
And every wrong thing righted—
The whole world shall be lighted
As Eden was of old.

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TITLE**